



Study: Don't waste wastewater

By Melissa Pamer, Staff Writer

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Los Angeles Department of Public Works
Environmental Engineer John Mays at the Tillman Water
Reclamation Plant in Van Nuys. (Hans Gutknecht /
Staff Photographer)

Reusing treated wastewater - a process rejected a decade ago as "toilet to tap" in Los Angeles - could help meet future water needs across the country, and in some cases may be safer than existing drinking supplies, according to a study released Tuesday.

The National Research Council examined challenges and benefits of reusing wastewater as water supplies dwindle and population increases.

Some 12 billion gallons of wastewater are discharged into oceans and estuaries each day, the report calculated. If that water was purified and reused, it could make up 6 percent of the nation's water supply.

"That's significant," said R. Rhodes Trussell,

chairman of the committee that wrote the report, which was sponsored in part by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

"It could have an important impact for the nation's water resources."

Pollutant analysis and treatment technology have improved and more research has been done on potential health effects since the council last examined water reuse in 1998. In the new report, an analysis found reused water can be as safe or safer than existing drinking water supplies with regard to contamination from chemicals and microbial agents.

"We have a lot more confidence now than we once did," said Trussell, who is president of a water-focused environmental engineering company in Pasadena.

Jim McDaniel, DWP's head of water systems, said the utility was encouraged by the report.

"Developing local water supplies such as recycled water is necessary because imported water continues to be more restricted due to environmental mitigation, legal rulings, and periods of dry weather and low snowpack," McDaniel said in an email.

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The need for more local water was highlighted last summer during a DWP public outreach campaign over a planned rate-hike request. For now, a number of DWP water recycling projects are on hold while the utility awaits the appointment of a ratepayer advocate by the City Council.

DWP's goal is to boost water recycling so that it accounts for 8 percent of the city's water supply by 2035, and it intends to release plans this spring to realize that goal, McDaniel said.

A decade ago, the department's plans to purify wastewater from Donald C. Tillman Reclamation Plant in Van Nuys and reintroduce it to the water supply through spreading grounds in Sun Valley were killed after a public outcry. Critics dubbed the plan "toilet to tap."

In the last few years, DWP has been cautious in reintroducing the concept of "advanced water treatment."

Wastewater currently treated at the Tillman plant is used to irrigate nearby golf courses and a Japanese garden on site, and to fill Lake Balboa. Most of the treated water, however, flows into the Los Angeles River.

"We have the possibility today to make pristine distilled water from mountain water or from raw sewage," said John Mays, a city environmental engineer who oversees construction at the plant. "It's just being wasted."

melissa.pamer@dailynews.com 818-713-3720
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